

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (13-12-1998 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

1 Corinthians 5

Introduction

So far Paul's concern has been with unity within the church, and Christian service. Now he is concerned with the purity of the church. Previously he had heard a report about divisions in the church. Now he has received another report about sexual misconduct within the church.

It was inevitable that there would be this kind of problem. Corinth was a sex-obsessed sea port, riddled with vice. The church members had been deeply involved in it. They lacked the background of Christian teaching over years. It was hard to unlearn a way of life that they had always known. This brought weakness into the church. The pressure on them was great. Non-Christian friends and family still lived immoral lives. There was temptation at every street corner. Their physical desires were always with them. Therefore this subject is very prominent in this epistle.

This makes 1 Corinthians a very relevant letter to today's church as well. It is a particular problem in the Church. It teaches us the importance of exercising church discipline immediately, before the rot can spread. This chapter helps us to see how sin in the church should be faced, not least in our own lives.

The problem faced by Paul

This was a particularly unsavoury episode in the life of the church. It was so bad and shocking that even the heathen, steeped in loose living, never got down to this level. A man in the church had his father's wife – presumably his step-mother – probably about his age. Whether she had just moved in with him, or earlier been divorced or widowed, we do not know. *εχειν* implies a continuing relationship, not an isolated lapse.

This was expressly forbidden by divine law in the Old Testament, and even shunned by heathen society (Leviticus 18:8). Presumably the woman was not a Christian, but the man was a professing Christian, and therefore Paul only mentions that he has to be disciplined.

Astonishingly, the church was not worried about the situation. They were full of pride when they ought to have been full of sorrow and doing something about it. Instead, they had accepted the situation, and were not bothered about it. Our one security against sin is being shocked at it. When we have ceased to be concerned about it in our own lives or in the church, we are in a perilous situation indeed.

Paul was aware of the seriousness of sin. The blasé attitude of the church was a deep disappointment to him, because it proved how shallow Christians they were, who had learnt so little. He was also concerned that if it was not dealt with soon, it would spread throughout the church as being the accepted thing to do. It would also bring the Gospel into disrepute with the heathen. Above all, the Lord's name was being

dragged in the dust. His honour was being besmirched. His standards were being totally disregarded by His professed followers.

Discipline to be exercised

Paul takes action straight away – excommunication is the only way to deal with this. **Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit....When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of the Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to satan...** (1 Corinthians 5:3-5). He was to be turned out of the church, forbidden to have fellowship with them, forbidden to come to the Lord's Table, i.e. loss of Christian privileges. To be "handed over to Satan" may be taken to mean put out into the world where Satan rules so that his sinful nature might be destroyed, that he might see his extreme sinfulness and repent. Another possible interpretation of v.5 is that his physical body might fall ill, and die, and therefore return to the Lord, his spirit saved.

This was not vindictive treatment. It was for the man's own good, to bring him to his senses, to see the error of his ways, turn from it, and repent, so that in the end he would be saved. The discipline was done in sorrow, and not in cruelty. It was for the cause of the Gospel, for the man's own good and for the sake of the church. **Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?** (1 Corinthians 5:6).

Also in the letter Paul deals with others who were guilty of other things that harm the church and dishonour the Lord, and are not consistent with Christian profession. These other incidents were not as outrageous as this one, but still serious in themselves.

Paul had written to them before (a letter which has not survived) telling them not to associate with sexually immoral people. They understood this to mean they were to disassociate themselves with non-Christians who were immoral. If that was the case, they would have to leave the world and live in isolation. What Paul had actually meant was that they were not to associate with people who profess to be Christians, **who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolator or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such men do not even eat** (1 Corinthians 5:11).

They were not to associate intimately with them, or have close relationships and friendship, which would suggest approval of their conduct. To associate with such people would suggest that their conduct was acceptable, even if they persisted and did not repent. To do nothing suggests that it does not matter if the "Christian" is questionably morally, materialistic, misuses tongue, dishonest, handing his body over to another force than the Holy Spirit. We must mix freely with outsiders to reach them for Christ, but must guard carefully our Christian standards within the church. This is the key to effective witness – be distinctive. Need penetration into the world, but purity within the church.

Significance of discipline in the church

Church discipline is not popular and not a much-discussed subject. We try to leave well alone. We do not want to be involved. We want to leave these issues to the elders. Yet the Protestant Reformers saw the three marks of the church as (1) preaching the Word, (2) administration of the Sacraments, and (3) discipline.

Sometimes we react against the harshness and cruelty of the past. In eighteenth century Scotland, it was punishable to carry a pail of water on the Sabbath. A minister was suspended because he had a shoulder of mutton roasted on the Sabbath. Girls who had children out of wedlock were publicly denounced twenty times in their own church, then sent around the presbytery to receive similar treatment in other churches. Some fled the country, committed suicide, or killed their babies. In 1774 in certain circles, men lost their office, voting rights and their right to attend the Lord's Supper just for being in dispute. Their actions were regarded as destroying the peace and prosperity of the church. Others were rebuked for exposing the infirmities of a brother, neglecting to reprove an erring brother, failure to attend a church business meeting, or neglecting one's own church to attend another.

But the pendulum has now swung to the other extreme. Our forefathers were hard legalists, cruel and interfering, yet their concern was with the good name of the church and Christ. Nowadays we do not want to know. There still needs to be high standards, and maintenance of Christian witness. Joining the church is not doing a favour. It brings solemn responsibilities.

Undoubtedly, discipline is to be exercised in tenderness and graciousness and with care. Beware of double standards and anomalies. Which is worse – divorce, or living with a wife but making life hell for her? A mistake in a moment of passion, or persistently destroying character of another by slander and gossip?

But church discipline is still important. Standards among Christians should be upheld. Beware of easy-going tolerance. Need to be jealous for the Lord's honour. Beware lest the spirit of lawlessness in the world invades the church. Be careful for the good name of the church, and sensitive to the sinfulness of sin. And if the situation for discipline arises, be prepared to act with courage, faithfulness and humility.

The Cross of Calvary commits us to holiness of life

Returning to the immediate problem with which the chapter began. Sin within the fellowship can spread like yeast through dough. It affects the whole fellowship. This picture of yeast and leaven brings to mind the Passover, observed by Jews to commemorate their deliverance from Egypt. All Jews had to remove from their houses all leaven before the feast. There was a scrupulous search with candles. They shook out their clothes, emptied the cupboards, opened every drawer, cleared every nook and cranny.

So the Christian church has its "Passover" as well. Jesus Christ was the true Passover lamb, sacrificed for us. In the Christian parallel, Christians have to clear out all the old leaven of malice and wickedness. Remember His great sacrifice with unleavened bread – i.e. bread without the yeast of sincerity and truth. The Cross of Christ leaves us no option but to have a pure church. Christ has died that it might be forgiven, and given eternal life. Cannot go on living as we used to.

We are His people now, called by His name, children in the family of the Holy God. If we compromise with sin, all our worship is a charade full of insincerity and falsehood. We have all committed sin, and all need cleansing. We become increasingly aware of it as we grow in the Christian life. We need to be ruthless with anything that taints our fellowship with Christ. Paul is not expecting perfect holiness or absolute purity. But sincerity and genuineness is vital. Need to be open and honest about sin. Face the need for repentance, and forsake sin. Do not ignore and cover it up, or pretend or deny it is there.

Need to celebrate Christian death and resurrection. Aim to do it every Lord's Day, because the first day of the week is when we commemorate the Lord's resurrection. Remember it every time you are at the Lord's Table. Treasure hymns with this emphasis. Christians are "Easter people" - we live on the other side of the Cross and the Resurrection. But it is meaningful to live as those who are forgiven, changed by the Cross and Resurrection. Need to watch against sin, and keep our conscience tender.

The world is watching to see a church which takes sin seriously, and a church which, in its times of rejoicing in its salvation, has awesome sense of God's nearness and authority. When I live in victory over forces that destroy others, people realize there is power and reason in our Salvation. **You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light** (1 Peter 2:9). **If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin** (1 John 1:7).